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ABSTRACT

This study examined social support as a component of naturally occurring social interaction, focusing on the provision and receipt of support and examining sex differences in support exchange. Seventy female and 54 male college freshmen completed a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record on which they recorded any social interaction they had which lasted 10 minutes or longer for a period of 14 days. The results showed that females reported receiving more support than did males. Females also reported providing more support than did males. Correlations showed that the rate of support exchange was reciprocal: the more support provided, the more received, for both males and females. Results specifically addressing the perceived amount of support exchange showed that where there was an imbalance between the receipt and provision of support, it was due to more support being received than was provided. This imbalance only occurred during interactions with the opposite sex, for both males and females. (NB)

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# Social Interaction: The Reciprocity of Social Support

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Social Interaction: The Reciprocity of Social Support

This paper reports preliminary analyses from a study conducted on social support that extends previous work (see Cohen & Wills, 1985, for a review) by 1) examining support as a component of naturally occurring social interaction, 2) being equally focused on the provision and receipt of support, and 3) examining sex differences in support exchange.

This report will focus on the relationship between the receipt and provision of support, and sex differences therein. It was hypothesized that females would receive more support than would males as shown by previous research (e.g., Butler, Giordano, & Neren, 1985; Caldwell, Pearson, & Chin, 1987).

Over the past decade researchers have also argued that females may provide more support than do males. These arguments stress the social role of the female as being one in which the caring of older relatives and children require the provision of support (e.g., Belle, 1982; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Fischer, 1982). Others, however, have presented arguments and data suggesting the possibility that females provide more support than do males because of factors other than their social role (e.g. Berg, 1984; Bernard, 1981). It was expected then that females would provide more support that would males.

Finally, Ingersoll-Dayton and Antonucci (1983) have shown that relationships tend to be reciprocal regarding support. That is, those people to whom one provides support tend to return support. Although the present data addressed the rate and amount of support reciprocity rather than the number of supportive individuals, it was expected that support exchange would be characterized by reciprocity.

Subjects. Subjects were 70 female and 54 male freshmen Introductory Psychology students who participated for course credit.

Procedure. Participants completed a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record (RIR; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977) on which they recorded any social interaction they had lasting ten minutes or longer for a period of 14 days (see Figure presented below). Interaction was defined as any behavior in which two or more people are responding to one another (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). Support was defined as a feeling of being loved, accepted or cared about, or a feeling that one is valued, trusted, respected, or held in esteem (cf Cobb, 1976). See Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) for a full description of the instructions provided to subjects.

Rochester Interaction Record (RIR)

Date: _____ Day: ____ Time: _____ am ___ pm ___

Length: _____ hrs _____ mins

Initials: _____ _____ _____ If more than 3 others: # of females ___

Sex: _____ _____ _____ # of males ____

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Support needed or desired: | none | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | a lot |
| Support received: | none | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | a lot |
| Intimacy: | not at all | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | very intimate |
| Quality: | unpleasant | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | very pleasant |
| Support provided: | none | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | a lot |
| Difficulty: | very easy | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | very difficult |
| Support other needed/desired: | none | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | a lot |

Nature: Work/Study Socializing Relaxing Life necessity Other

## Results

The Rochester Interaction Record Analysis Package (RIRAP; Nezlek & Wheeler, 1984) was used to transform the data into summary indices. Briefly, the variables created included overall averages for the various subjective measures on the RIR, overall averages broken down by sex of interactant and cointeractant, and overall averages broken down by degree of closeness (frequency of interaction) of interactants.

Results showed that females reported receiving more support ($M$=2.83), than did males ($M$=2.35), $t(122)=2.67$, $p < .01$. Females also reported providing more support ($M$=2.69), than did males ($M$=2.33), $t(122)=2.00$, $p < .05$.

Correlations (see Table 1) showed that the rate of support exchange was reciprocal. The more support provided, the more received, for both males and females. Two(sex) X 2(exchange: amount of support received, amount of support provided) repeated measures analyses were then conducted to examine reciprocity for the amount of support exchange. The absence of a main effect across the different levels of interaction composition (e.g. same-sex interaction, opposite-sex best friend interaction) would demonstrate reciprocity. Main effects were found for interactions involving the opposite-sex $F(1,122)=7.74$, $p < .01$, and the opposite-sex best friend $F(1,122)=5.03$, $p < .05$. Mean differences indicated that support was received to a greater degree than it was provided in both cases and for both sexes.

## Discussion

The finding that females reported receiving more support than did males is in agreement with other research (e.g. Butler et al, 1985; Caldwell et al, 1987; Stokes & Wilson, 1984). There are a number of explanations for this finding, perhaps the most obvious being that females ask for support (Butler et al. 1985). Second, females self-disclose more than do males (Jourard, 1979) which may elicit support from others. Third, females report more satisfaction with support than do males (Caldwell et al, 1987). If they convey their satisfaction to their supporters then they may increase the likelihood of receiving more support.

Results also showed that females reported providing more support than did males, supporting the arguments of others (Belle, 1982; Bernard, 1981; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980). Other data from this project showed that females perceived a greater need for support on the part of others than did males, thus, the support provision of females could be in response to this perception. It is also possible that females, having a greater desire or motivation to be communal, may have provided support to execute their communal orientation towards others.

Results specifically addressing the perceived amount of support exchange showed that where there was an imbalance between the receipt and provision of support it was due to more support being received than was provided. Moreover, this imbalance only occurred during interactions with the opposite-sex, for both sexes. Given that both sexes could not have received more support than they provided to the other sex, there is the possibility that a reporting bias operated such that both sexes liked to portray themselves as the receiver, rather than the provider, of support, but only with the opposite-sex. These results, however, were not consistent with a social desirability in responding.

The results point more towards a perceptual bias. Perhaps the best explanation is to draw on Clark and Mills (1979) distinction between exchange and communal relationships. In a nutshell, Clark and Mills (1979) argue that perceptions of reciprocity depend on the type of relationship one is engaged in, or desires to be engaged in. In a communal relationship benefits and costs are not part of an exchange process. The defining feature of a communal relationship is that members are concerned about the welfare of the other and respond to the others' need, regardless of previous exchange. In their research, Clark and Mills (1979) found that attraction for a partner decreased when a benefit was directly reciprocated while a communal relationship was desired, suggesting that individuals do not want "tit for tat" reciprocity when the development of such a relationship is their intention.

If one accepts that freshmen are in the process of heterosocial orientation then the opposite sex may be considered a potential pool of communal relationships. One may be motivated, at this age and in this social milieu, to perceive exchanges with opposite-sex interactants as communal and not exchange-based. One is also motivated to believe that the other is responding to the one's needs unselfishly (cf Kelley, 1983) hence the perception that one receives more support from the opposite-sex than one provides to them.

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Table 1

Relationship between Support Provided and Support Received

| | Overall | Same | Opp | S1 | S2 | O1 | O2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Females | .84 | .77 | .81 | .66 | .84 | .85 | .65 |
| Males | .88 | .80 | .76 | .82 | .55 | .82 | .61 |

Note. For females n = 70, for males n = 54. All $p$'s < .01. Same = same-sex cointeractants. Opp = Opposite-sex cointeractants. S1, O1 = Same, opposite-sex best friend interaction. S2, O2 = Same, opposite-sex second-best friend interaction.